Low-threshold services: Addressing housing structural barriers for BIPOC unsheltered Bostonians who use drugs

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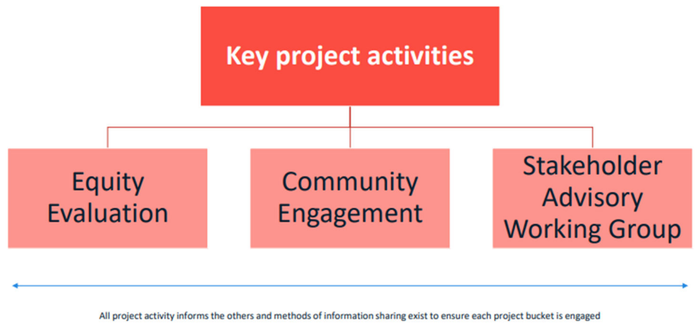
BACKGROUND

There is an over-representation of Black and Latinx individuals experiencing substance use disorder (SUD) among the homeless population in Boston, MA. In addition, there has been an increase in overdose deaths in recent years, particularly among Black individuals. In recent years, low threshold housing with comprehensive services have emerged as an effective and evidence-based strategy to support individuals living with substance use disorders who are experiencing unsheltered homelessness. As a response to the increasing number of individuals who experience both unsheltered homelessness and SUD, in January 2022, the city of Boston established six low-threshold sites (LTS). **The Boston Pathways project** aims to evaluate this policy with a focus on racial equity.



OBJECTIVE

To understand outcomes, challenges, and learnings of the policies that created and describe the LTS program and it's practices though a structural racism framework.

METHODS

Quantitative

- **Administrative LTS** data for 662 guests from January 2022 to June 2024
- Descriptive analysis of demographic characteristics and outcomes
- Multivariate competing risk models to assess the association between demographic characteristics and permanent housing placement adjusted by type of shelter.

Qualitative

- **23 Interviews with guests who identify as BIPOC** focusing on: experience prior to the LTS, experience and impact on the LTS, recommendations
- Theme framework analysis – applying a **Structural Racism Framework**

Acknowledgments:
This project is supported by the Office of Minority Health (OMH) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) as part of a financial assistance award totaling $492,838 with 100 percent funded by OMH/OASH/HHS. The contents are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement, by OMH/OASH/HHS, or the U.S. Government. For more information, please visit www.minorityhealth.hhs.gov
We'd also like to thank and acknowledge the LTS guests and site staff for their engagement and contribution to this project.

RESULTS

Quantitative

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of guests (Jan 2022-Jun 2024)

	N = 622
Race and Hispanic Ethnicity	
Black non-Hispanic/Latinx	25.7%
Hispanic/Latinx	22.7%
Other non-Hispanic/Latinx	2.9%
White non-Hispanic/Latinx	42.7%
Gender	
Female	34.3%
Male	61.9%
Other	1.5%
Age group	
18 to 34 years old	25.5%
35 to 44 years old	37.2%
45 to 54 years old	22.5%
55 years or older	11.9%

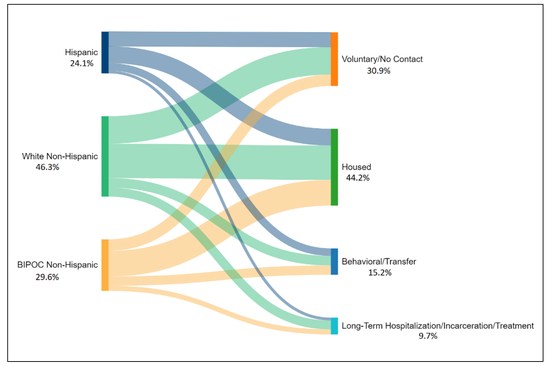


Figure 1. Sankey diagram of move out reason by race for guests that moved out by June 30th 2024.

Competing risk model results :

- **Hispanic/Latinx** guests were **30% less likely** to be placed in permanent housing compared to White (HR 0.70, 95%CI(0.50,0.98)
- **Black non-Hispanic** guests were **11% more likely** to be placed in permanent housing compared to White, although this result was not statistically significant (HR 1.11, 95%CI 0.80, 1.54)
- **Female** guests were **31% less likely** to be placed in permanent housing compared to male guests (HR 0.69, 95%CI 0.52,0.92)

Qualitative

THEME	FINDINGS
History of homelessness and prior experience with Housing	**Barriers related to structural racism and marginalization prevented participants from becoming rehoused prior to the LTS:** Incarceration, lack of job access, low wages and job instability, experiences of stigma and discrimination.
LTS experience	**Many participants found the LTS to better address the structural barriers compared to previous housing services.** Satisfied with, and benefitted from, various elements of the LTS: • High quality, empathetic, **equal,** and **respectful treatment** by staff Supportive services such as **accessing documentation**, benefits, **housing vouchers**, medical care, mental health care, substance use treatment or services, and **sealing criminal records**
LTS Impact	• Better access to housing • Sense of safety and ability to rest • Social connections and relationships within and outside of the LTS • Improved physical and mental health • Some improvement in substance use behaviors • Quality of life
Reflections on Life after the LTS	**Housing was not just a means to get off the streets**, but as a step towards **building the lives they wanted** for themselves. **Supports and resources they may need to stay housed** Financial assistance or help accessing income through disability or other benefits; mental health services or access to a therapist; ongoing case management; substance use disorder treatment services; help with daily life activities These reflect the **structural racism and systemic barriers that BIPOC LTS guests experience**

DISCUSSION

BIPOC LTS guests experience different structural barriers to access housing. The LTS have successfully placed 44% of the guests in permanent housing so far, helping guests address some of these barriers, such as clearing criminal records and accessing documentation. Yet, systematic obstacles remain and might delay housing access for specific groups as observed by a lower likelihood of permanent housing placement for Hispanic and female guests.